

Voter Registration: Empowering Clients Through Agency-Based Voter Registration

Shannon R. Lane
Nancy A. Humphreys
Ellen Graham
Natalie Matthews
Jennifer Moriarty

ABSTRACT. Historically, social workers have used voter registration to politically empower their clients. This paper describes the agency-based voter registration project of the University of Connecticut School of Social Work, Nancy A. Humphreys Institute for Political Social Work, including the project's implementation, and evaluation. Voter registration principles emerge from analyses of successful agency-based voter registration programs. doi:10.1300/J508v06n04_06 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2007 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

KEYWORDS. Voter registration, politics, field practica, social work education

Shannon R. Lane, MSW, Nancy A. Humphreys, DSW, Ellen Graham, MSW, Natalie Matthews, MSW, and Jennifer Moriarty, MSW, are all affiliated with The University of Connecticut, School of Social Work, Nancy A. Humphreys Institute for Political Social Work, 1798 Asylum Avenue, West Hartford, CT 06117-2698.

The authors would like to acknowledge the invaluable work done by Joanne Cannon and Lauren McPhail as part of coordinating the voter registration activities described here and the editorial assistance of Dr. Alex Gitterman.

Journal of Policy Practice, Vol. 6(4) 2007
Available online at <http://jpp.haworthpress.com>
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doi:10.1300/J508v06n04_06

Social workers are expected to empower their clients, particularly people who are "vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty" (NASW, 1999, ¶1). Disempowered clients are disenfranchised from electoral politics. This paper discusses agency-based (field placements) voter registration led by the University of Connecticut School of Social Work. Starting in the fall of 2000, all field-placed students were encouraged to participate in the voter registration project. The implementation of this project over a six-year period and the evaluation data are presented.

BACKGROUND

In the early 1980's, Human SERVE (Service Employees Registration and Voter Education) was founded under the leadership of Professors Richard Cloward and Frances Fox Piven. Registering social service clients to vote was the organization's primary purpose. A coalition comprised of national social, human service, and women's organizations joined forces to achieve this purpose. The coalition encouraged their state and local affiliates to organize voter registration drives. Human SERVE raised several million dollars to fund the voter registration drive (Piven & Cloward, 1998, 2000).

The coalition targeted schools of social work and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and its chapters. Human SERVE developed voter registration materials and strategies for schools to involve students in registering clients and reminding them to vote on Election Day, and for NASW Chapters to engage their members in client voter registration. With Human SERVE's assistance, many schools of social work and NASW chapters initiated voter registration drives. In 1984, as a result of the coalition's efforts, seven million new people were registered to vote in the Presidential election (Piven & Cloward, 1998, 2000).

The Human SERVE campaign experienced numerous barriers to registering clients. Getting social workers authorized to register voters created significant challenges. In most states, arcane and provincial voter registration laws restricted the authority to a few designated officials to register voters. Moreover, these designated officials were only authorized to register voters who lived in the borough, city or town in which the individual had been deputized as a registrar of voters. Thus, agencies that provided services in many boroughs, towns or cities had to deputize many staff, so that at least one was available to register clients from each municipality served by the agency. This registration system

created barriers for agency-based voter registration drives. The approach of registering one individual at a time proved to be cumbersome and time consuming, and the actors involved concluded that "... drives were not equal to the magnitude of the problem" (Cloward & Piven, 1995, p. 2494).

To address the magnitude of the problem, Human SERVE and other organizations lobbied for a federal law that would modernize voter registration. After considerable effort by an impressive array of national interest groups and organizations, legislation was successfully moved through the U.S. Congress only to be vetoed by then President George H.W. Bush. President Bill Clinton eventually signed the National Voter Rights Act (NVRA) of 1993 (NVRA) (P.L. 103-31). On May 20, 1993, social work educators and activists Richard Cloward and Frances Fox Piven were present at the bill signing in the White House Rose Garden (Dreier, 1994; Piven & Cloward, 2000).

THE NATIONAL VOTER REGISTRATION ACT (NVRA) AND BEYOND

In the 1992 Presidential election, only 55% of eligible voters voted (FEC, n.d.b), causing concern about the health of our democracy (Piven & Cloward, 2000; Patterson, 2002). The NVRA went into effect on January 1, 1995, including a number of provisions that were intended to open up the voter registration process and encourage easier registration and voting. The law created new opportunities for registering citizens to vote and eliminated significant voter registration barriers (League of Women Voters, 2003). For example, the law required all states to recognize a universal mail-in voter registration form, which eliminated the need for deputized registrars.

Since the new law required all states to include voter registration materials as part of vehicle registration, it became known as "Motor Voter." From the perspective of empowering the disempowered, a critical provision of the law was the mandate that some public social service agencies offer voter registration to all clients at both the point of intake and the time of annual re-certification. The public social service agencies that were incorporated in this mandate included those organizations that administered employment services, welfare payments and services, and disability services. Private social service agencies were encouraged, but not mandated, to offer their clients the opportunity to register to vote as a regular part of the service giving process (U.S. Department of Justice,

n.d.; Piven & Cloward, 2000). The reaction of local authorities to this legislation was mixed: Some states and localities followed the lead of the federal government in encouraging efforts to make voter registration easier, while others challenged the law and its requirements.

Despite these positive developments, some significant restrictions on registration of clients continued. Dating back to the 1960's War on Poverty legislation, certain agencies had been specifically prohibited from voter registration of their clients. These prohibitions were not addressed in the NVRA. For example, both Head Start and Community Development Block Grant agencies continued to be prohibited from doing any type of voter registration with their clients (Piven & Cloward, 2000; National Head Start Association, 2000-2005).

In 2002, Congress passed the Help America Vote Act (HAVA). This legislation addressed some remaining unresolved voting issues, including requirements that all states accept voter registration by mail, guidelines for computerized statewide voter registration list requirements, and eventual replacement of punch card or lever voting machines. Voters were also allowed to use provisional ballots (FEC, n.d.a).

As of 2006, forty-five states require voters to register in advance of Election Day. Four states (Maine, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Wyoming) have "same-day voter registration," meaning that an eligible citizen can register at the polling place on Election Day. North Dakota requires no registration, only proof of identification and residency on Election Day (Election Assistance Commission, 2006). Currently, the vast majority of social work clients are subject to advance registration, although efforts to reduce or eliminate barriers to voter registration are ongoing. In some states, same day voter registration, early voting, and voting by mail have been enacted (Patterson, 2002; League of Women Voters, 2003).

RATIONALE FOR VOTER REGISTRATION BY SOCIAL WORKERS

Opponents of eliminating barriers to registration argue that advanced registration is necessary to avoid voter fraud (Piven & Cloward, 2000; Patterson, 2002). Since current registration laws have been ineffective in combating fraud, restrictions have been made more and more severe (FEC, 2001; Piven & Cloward, 2000; Patterson, 2002). These increased restrictions have further decreased voter turnout (Weisbard, 2005; Freeman & Bleifuss, 2006). Advanced registration has been used to

closely monitor, perhaps even suppress, voting among disadvantaged groups. Traditional voter registration procedures have depressed the vote of those who cannot easily navigate the bureaucratic obstacles necessary to register to vote (Patterson, 2002). Consequently, voter registration and turnout are particularly low among groups that are likely to have contact with social workers (e.g., low income and people of color, 18-34 year olds, single mothers, the homeless, and other disadvantaged groups) (Patterson, 2002). The barriers to registration and voting institutionalize oppression.

Voting has reached a dangerously low rate. In local and primary elections, voting is at its lowest. In the 2006 primary season, only 15 percent of eligible voters (those of voting age who are US citizens) went to the polls, down 17 percent from 2002. Voting rates have decreased 57 percent since reaching a high in 1966 (Gans, 2006). While voting is at its highest in presidential elections, the percentage of eligible voters who voted in the 2004 presidential election was 61%, meaning that more than 78 million eligible voters stayed away from the polls. Therefore, the winning presidential candidate, George W. Bush, won only 31% of the total possible vote of all eligible voters (Faler, 2005). Since many elections are frequently decided by a small number of votes, the low level of participation is of particular concern. In 2006, for example, Joe Courtney won the election for Connecticut's US House of Representatives 2nd District seat by only 83 votes out of 242,413 cast (a difference of less than four hundredths of one percent) (CT Secretary of State, 2006). In 2002, Tim Johnson retained his US Senate seat in South Dakota with a margin of 524 votes out of 337,508 cast (two tenths of one percent) (SD Secretary of State, 2005).

Growing evidence associates the nature and type of public policies adopted by elected officials and the rate of voter participation by lower income people. States less likely to enact punitive work requirements, time limits or family caps when considering changes to welfare policy have the highest rate of voting among individuals in lower socioeconomic groups (Avery & Peffley, 2005). Similarly, large electoral turnouts by lower class voters are associated with fewer cuts in welfare spending (Hill, Leigley, & Hinton-Andersson, 1995). In examining the 1990 non-presidential election year voting data, Johnson (2001) found that electoral participation among the poor was one of the major predictors in difference in the level of AFDC benefits among various states.

Social workers' clients could make a significant difference in the outcome of elections. The NASW Code of Ethics (NASW, 1999) calls for social workers to work for the empowerment of clients. Political

power is one of the clearest and most direct ways for clients to have influence in society, particularly if they are able to use the power of the vote as part of a voting bloc (Piven & Cloward, 2000). An old adage in politics suggests that those who do not participate in the political process "get what they deserve." The most minimal participation in the political process is voting. However, political apathy and registration barriers limit poor people's participation in the political process. Overcoming political apathy and engaging reluctant citizens in the political process requires the knowledge and skills common to social workers.

These factors have inspired the creation of a voter registration program at the University of Connecticut School of Social Work. In addition to the primary goal of registering clients, the program wanted to educate students and the social service community about the importance and methods of voter registration. The program's design draws on twenty plus years of effort and activity by Human SERVE and others to promote agency-based client voter registration (Canady & Thyer, 1990; Colby, 1987; Cloward, 1995, Piven & Cloward, 1988; Piven & Cloward, 2000) and is organized by the school's Nancy A. Humphreys Institute for Political Social Work (Political Institute). The authors' hope is that this article will inspire other schools and programs to engage students and field placement agencies to undertake voter registration drives.

SCHOOL-WIDE VOTER REGISTRATION PROJECT

Each year, a group of second-year MSW interns who are placed at the Political Institute staff this voter registration project. Before the fall semester begins, a letter, signed by the Dean and the professor who oversees the project, is mailed to all field instructors explaining the project and requesting that they assist their students in carrying out a voter registration project in the first few weeks of field work. Concomitantly, the field work director distributes a memo to all faculty field advisors requesting that they discuss voter registration with students at the start of the semester and outlining ways the project could be incorporated into students' educational contracts. These written communications are reinforced through discussions of voter registration at field instructor trainings and faculty meetings.

Students are informed of the project through a letter from the group of second-year interns (their fellow students), as well as through presen-

tations at required field orientation events. A packet is given to every student before entering field work, including a variety of materials needed to complete a voter registration project in the field agency. Materials are also available electronically on the school's website (samples can be found at <http://politicalinstitute.uconn.edu/voterreg.htm>). These materials include:

- the letter written by the interns, student-to-student, introducing the voter registration project and its importance, encouraging them to participate, outlining the ethical obligation of social workers to be involved in the voter registration of clients, and encouraging students to contact the second-year interns with any questions or concerns;
- a copy of the letter that had been sent to all field instructors;
- voter registration cards in both English and Spanish, specific to the state in which each student's field placement is located;
- a booklet published by the Secretary of the State in both English and Spanish regarding the voting process and procedures, and voters' individual rights;
- a booklet produced by the school with information designed specifically for social work students doing voter registration; and
- visual aids including a waiting room poster and a bumper sticker.

The packet is revised every year to reflect feedback from students and faculty. Recent additions include a list of "Frequently Asked Questions" (FAQs) for students and a list of FAQs for voters. The students' FAQs include information about the legality and the appropriateness of running such a drive at a field agency and provide contact information for students if they need assistance. FAQs for voters provide information about the requirements for registering to vote and special information for specific client populations such as homeless individuals and felons. A proposed addition to future packets is the addition of a CD-ROM created by a local community organization that provides self-directed training for doing voter registration drives.

ONGOING ASSISTANCE FOR STUDENTS

Sustaining momentum, supplying user-friendly information, and providing open lines of communication for assistance are extremely impor-

tant components. Weekly reminders are placed in the school's in-house newsletter, reminding students of important dates and deadlines and encouraging them to contact the second-year interns with any questions or concerns. Requests for additional materials or information are responded to in a timely manner. Three voter registration outreach sessions are held, providing information (and free food). These sessions increase interns' knowledge about the voter registration project and familiarize them with some of the challenges they may experience.

A significant challenge is the limited time between the beginning of field work and the voter registration deadline. The internship begins in early September; the deadline for voter registration in this region is the middle of October. This does not leave much time for the students to implement voter registration. Every effort is made to provide students with the required resources to complete the process, even within the limited time available.

PROJECT EVALUATION

At the end of each election season, an evaluation survey is distributed to all students currently enrolled in field work. The survey's purposes are to gather data about the students' voter registration knowledge and to evaluate their voter registration activities. The survey also collects demographic data and suggestions for improving voter registration in future years, as well as students' personal political activity. Since the survey is distributed in required practice courses, the response rate has been nearly 100%. From 2001 to 2005, data was collected from 947 students.

Of the 947 students who participated in the survey, 22 percent engaged in some type of voter registration activity. Understandably, during presidential elections and well-publicized statewide elections, student participation was the highest. In the period just before the 2004 presidential election, 38 percent of the students participated in voter registration. Interestingly, some students also used the materials to register co-workers, family members, and friends.

Students implemented a variety of different approaches to register clients. Making voter registration materials continuously available to their clients or other agency staff represented a prevalent approach. Organizing a special event such as a voter registration day, week, or weeks for registering clients was yet another approach. Presenting information about voter registration to clients or staff in a public forum,

such as a staff meeting, represented a third approach. Finally, students also set up a self-administered voter registration system in agency waiting rooms, providing clients with pressure-free access to voting registration materials.

In identifying the challenges or barriers to client participation in agency-based voter registration activities (students were allowed to choose more than one barrier), nearly half (47%) reported that the short amount of time between the beginning of field and the registration deadline was a barrier. Sixteen percent of the social work students found that the clients with whom they worked were ineligible to register or vote (e.g., not yet 18 years of age, felony convictions, or non-citizens.) These students who could not register clients often conducted voter registration with agency staff, family, or friends. For 15 percent of the students, the competing demands of their field placement negatively affected their voter registration project. Eight percent identified that their agency or field instructor discouraged or prohibited them from registering prospective voters.

Parenthetically, an important finding is that many students (and anecdotally, some field instructors) requested more training on voter registration. In response to this finding, the second-year interns organized a variety of informal and formal training and discussion programs. An effective part of these trainings has been presentation of successful prior voter registration projects. Three examples of these successful projects follow.

EXAMPLES OF SUCCESSFUL AGENCY-BASED VOTER REGISTRATION PROJECTS

The examples of successful projects include voter registration in a supportive housing project, domestic violence shelters throughout the state, and a congregate meal program.

Supportive Housing Program: Of the forty-four residents in this housing program, eight residents were categorized as chronically homeless, while an additional thirteen residents had been homeless at some point in the past. Many expressed feelings of alienation and disenfranchisement from the community and civic life in general. The community's opposition to the supportive housing program deepened residents' feelings of alienation. The residents frequently verbalized their desire to be accepted and recognized as contributing members of the community.

Unexpectedly, the voter registration program facilitated their community integration.

During the initial year of the voter registration project, interested residents were encouraged to register fellow residents to vote, resulting in five new registered voters. During the second year of the project, the momentum grew as voter registration activities coincided with an important citywide mayoral race. This time the residents provided the leadership to the project. The residents and the social work student collaborated to plan a voter registration session in the community room of the building, including advertising, recruiting other residents to assist, and registering voters. A resident-leader contacted each resident to encourage him to register. The strategy proved successful, with eleven residents registering to vote, including two first time registrations and one resident whose voting rights were restored after a felony conviction. On Election Day, the residents transported fellow residents to the polls. One resident, a first time voter, reported that he felt as though he had made a difference by voting, and felt like he was a part of something. The residents felt a sense of their increasing political power.

These residents have already begun to plan their next voter registration efforts. In an effort to be more accepted and integrated into the community, they plan to expand the project by providing voter registration to the neighborhood. These residents have taken ownership of the importance of begin a voting citizen and have truly become invested in the political empowerment of residents and community neighbors.

Domestic Violence Coalition: This statewide coalition of social agencies coordinates the work of 18 domestic violence shelters. Because of the variety of shelters involved, the voter registration project was individually tailored to each shelter's needs. Each executive director was given the opportunity to choose an approach best suited to her shelter's residents and staff. In some shelters, materials were left with staff members so the staff could conduct their own drives. In others, the student attended staff meetings to discuss the importance of voter registration and provide staff members with materials and directions for their own voter registration drive. Finally, in some shelters the student visited and spoke directly with the clients about voting and registering to vote.

Voter registration faces a unique challenge in domestic violence shelters. The voter registration card requires an address, and since that address becomes public information, registering to vote could potentially endanger the registrant and her children. To deal with this most serious impediment, the Secretary of State in Connecticut instituted an innovative address confidentiality program for survivors of domestic violence. This program gives survivors an address to which their mail

can be sent without being traceable to them. The mail is then forwarded to them. This innovation offers significant protection to this particular population of social service clients. Should such protections be considered by other states, it would facilitate the registration of domestic violence survivors.

Congregate Meal Program: This meal program serves primarily African-Americans in an urban area. Initially, the voter registration efforts in this setting were unsuccessful. The student organized a voter registration drive in the space where clients ate and gathered before and after meals. A simple announcement prior to lunch being served, asking if anyone would like to register to vote, was the first step. This strategy did not work—no client volunteered to register. Although at first discouraged, the student reassessed the situation and decided that a different approach was needed.

As a young white woman, the student felt like an outsider among the mostly middle-aged African American men served by the program. She looked for a strategy that would allow her to bridge some of the many differences between them. In observing the daily activities of the clients, she noticed that each day prior to lunch, clients would often gather to discuss the sports section of the newspaper. She joined that conversation, and through this method began the process of becoming more accepted by members. Over time, she broadened the conversations from sports to other topics in the newspaper, including the presidential election. As the men's comfort level with the student grew, the clients were able to discuss their frustration and anger with the current political climate, dismay about the outcome of the 2000 elections, and their personal feelings of helplessness to change the situation. This step enabled the student to introduce the idea that they could be a part of a political change process. Thirty clients registered to vote.

Other challenges emerged in working with this population as well. The student had to help former felons to regain their voting rights, deal with many clients' lack of an address where they could receive the voter registration card, and find clients transportation to the polling location once they were registered.

OTHER AGENCY-BASED OPTIONS

In addition to these three examples, students have implemented many different approaches to voter registration in their field agencies. The organization of voter registration drives in public areas of an agency, such

as waiting rooms, entrances, reception areas, communal areas and cafeterias, has been a successful strategy. One student registered more than 60 clients in the cafeteria of a Veterans Administration hospital. In a university-based teaching hospital, several hundred new voters were registered by stationing interns and hospital volunteers at all entrances to clinics and medical specialties.

Other students conducted registration drives at existing organization and community events, such as PTA meetings, fairs and celebrations, athletic events, and tenant meetings. By incorporating voter registration into existing activities, the registration drive acquired a level of credibility that would be more difficult to obtain in a stand-alone activity. Some students worked with their agencies to include voter registration in the agency's existing intake and/or annual client recertification process, much as it is included in the vehicle registration process under the "Motor Voter" law. Other students chose to organize door-to-door voter registration drives in housing projects and other neighborhoods where their clients lived. This is a labor-intensive approach, and requires a high commitment of time and energy by students and their field agency (Cloward, 2000).

Students in settings where clients were not eligible to vote, such as schools, often found ways to participate in the process by registering students' parents, family members, or agency staff. Many also used the materials to register their own family and friends, or in their places of employment.

EXTENSION OF STUDENT LED PROJECT TO SOCIAL WORKERS IN PRIVATE PRACTICE

A large well-known clinical social work private practice, while not a field work agency, learned of and requested to participate in the voter registration campaign. The private practice clinicians requested assistance in implementing a waiting room, self-administered system of voter registration. The social workers wanted to differentiate their therapeutic relationship from the voter registration drive. The self-administered system of voter registration permitted the clients to have autonomy. The self-administered voter registration consisted of an eye-catching poster that featured a color picture of the White House with the statement "*Your vote will determine who lives here!*" A box of mail-in voter registration cards and a detailed set of instructions were included.

The private practice group paid for the postage for the voter registration cards. An article about the project in their newsletter led several other clinical social workers to contact the second year interns for the registration materials. In total, more than half a dozen clinical social work practice waiting rooms had self-administered voter registration services in place during the last election cycle.

LESSONS LEARNED

Agency-based voter registration projects can be tailored to a wide variety of fields of practice, agencies, and client populations. Each approach must be responsive to particular clients, staff and agency cultures. Creative approaches can engage clients' participation in the political process.

Another lesson: influencing clients to register to vote is a process. Overcoming years of political disengagement is not accomplished quickly or easily. Building a trusting relationship is essential. Overcoming the personal and structural barriers to voter registration takes time and skill. For example, survivors of domestic violence have to be protected. For another example, rules governing convicted felons vary from state to state and must be clearly understood by anyone undertaking voter registration. Once a voter registration project is initiated, it can have a ripple effect. Other agencies, staff or clients may become invested in the importance of more people being registered and voting. This ripple effect has consistently been an unanticipated benefit of the field work voter registration projects.

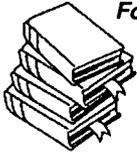
To be successful, voter registration projects require the leadership and support of critical stakeholders, including the Dean, the faculty, the field education staff, students, field instructors and agency executives. In addition, the development of a collaborative relationship with the official responsible for voter registration, the Secretary of State in this case, has been important in providing materials, resources and assistance. Over the years, some agency staff have raised concerns that voter registration is "too political." Training materials must emphasize that voter registration is legal, ethical and essential to social work's social justice purpose. By law, all voter registration must be "non-partisan" and, therefore, perfectly appropriate for agency involvement.

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doi:10.1300/J508v06n04_06



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